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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HILLAH 000126

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SUBJECT: WASIT FADILHA HEAD ON SCIRI PLANS FOR FEDERALISM

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CLASSIFIED BY: Douglas Meurs, Acting Regional Coordinator, REO
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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On July 26, REO staff met with Sheikh Abbas Al Zaidi, a self-professed "moderate" cleric who is the interim head of all Fadilha activities in Wasit Province. Al Zaidi claimed to be speaking for Fadilha spiritual head Ayatollah Yaqoubi as he made the following points: 1) Sheikh Yaqoubi is hoping for a visit from U.S. officials to his offices in Najaf; 2) the Americans should not rely on the marjaya'iya (Ayatollah Ali Sistani), but speak directly to southern Shi'a; 3) SCIRI intends to set up a Southern nine-province federal region before the next provincial council elections and is already regularly holding closed governors' coordination meetings in Najaf; and 4) Moqtada al-Sadr remains opposed to a nine-province region, but is open to forming a three-province South Central region. Al-Zaidi warned against Iranian influence and SCIRI corruption in Wasit Province, saying that he fears "the Iranian flag will soon raise over Wasit." END SUMMARY

¶2. (SBU) Sheikh Abbass Al-Zaidi had requested the July 26 meeting with the REO, noting that he had not had any contact with Americans since CPA days. He introduced himself as the representative of Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Ali Al-Yaqoubi and general supervisor of the Al-Fadilha (Virtue) Party, and its religious arm, the Virtuous Clerics. He is currently running the Fadilha religious school in Wasit, the Al Sadr Religious University, but said he will shortly take over a joint Kuwait/Iraqi religious studies program. He speaks some English.

¶3. (C) Al-Zaidi said he spoke with the knowledge of Fadilha Ayatollah Al-Yaqoubi (and said he was on his way to Najaf to meet with Al-Yaqoubi). He commented that like himself, Ayatollah Al-Yaqoubi hoped for more contact with the Americans and extended an open invitation to meet with him in Najaf. Al-Zaidi offered to facilitate such a visit.

SCIRI and Nine-Province Federalism

¶4. (C) Al-Zaidi stated that SCIRI intends to form a nine-province Southern federal region before the next Provincial Council elections. He saw SCIRI as aware that voters will drift away from the religious parties because of their poor performance in governing the provinces, and therefore, the party will want to use its current majority control of southern provincial councils to set up this Shi'a "super region."

¶5. (C) He confirmed reports that southern governors are meeting monthly in Najaf to discuss coordination of provincial

reconstruction along regional lines. Al-Zaidi said that he had been present when the Basra governor had received a phone call from Najaf Governor Altaee, inviting him to the next session (the Basra Governor, a Fadilha member, had refused). According to Al-Zaidi, the meetings are usually billed as something innocuous - "South Central Security Coordination Meeting" or a similar title, but agendas focus on building regional capacity and preparations for launching a Shi'a federal state.

¶6. (C) Al-Zaidi detailed what he saw as SCIRI strategy in pushing toward a nine-province region. SCIRI will continue to target illiterate rural voters who are prone to associating SCIRI with the marjaya'ia, he said. Iran will fund all sides in order to neutralize intra-Shi'a opposition. He noted that Iran is also in the process of cutting off the Basra business community from Arab suppliers in order to gain influence in the province. Assassinations will remain a important Badr Organization tool. Finally, he said, Najaf is a special focus as SCIRI works to spread Iranian influence through the city.

¶7. (C) Al-Zaidi commented that increasingly, SCIRI and Da'wa domination of provincial councils is paying off as they are in a position to control who receives a provincial government job. Applicants are made to sign a statement committing them to vote for SCIRI or Da'wa and even acknowledging that they support a nine-province federal region, Al-Zaidi claimed.

¶8. (C) Despite this multi-pronged strategy, Al-Zaidi said, SCIRI could only succeed at putting together a nine-province region if allowed to by the United States. The majority of southern Shi'a do not support SCIRI's plan and do not wish to form a larger federal region, he concluded.

Moqtada Al-Sadr: Not A Chip Off the Old Block

¶9. (C) During an explanation of the different roots of Fadilha, Al-Zaidi paused to praise Mohammed Al-Sadr as someone who told

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followers "to be Arab because the Persians will walk on you with iron shoes." The son (Moqtada al-Sadr), Al-Zaidi said, had "defamed his legacy." Nonetheless, Al-Zaidi added, he had heard from various Sadrist leaders that MAS continued to reject a SCIRI-led nine-province federal region. MAS would possibly support a Najaf/Karbala/Babil region, but would not go beyond that, Al-Zaidi asserted. Fundamentally, Al-Zaidi said, MAS believed his father's assassination had been arranged by Iran and he remained anti-Iranian.

Wasit Province: Serious Corruption

¶10. (C) Al-Zaidi said he had extensive documentation about construction corruption within Wasit's Provincial Council. His party had "given up" trying to track how much money Governor Turfa was siphoning off from border crossing traffic, he said. He blamed the corruption on "Iranian collaborators," including Majed Ali Asker (aka Abu Nidal) the provincial Da'wa Party head, and Naseer Al-Hadad, the Badr Organization chief. In talking about his own party's chances in upcoming elections, he noted that Fadilha is as much a "religious and social" organization as a political party, and accordingly, would always be more limited in its membership.

MEURS